

## REFLECTION

Pat Dick

October 26, 2014

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 and Matthew 22:34-46

I am in the habit of arising early, 4:30 or so, and sitting outside with a cup of coffee and a small flashlight, wrapped in whatever I need for warmth, spending some time alone with God. I often shine the light into the distance and usually see a pair of eyes, nothing more. The eyes may slowly rise and move away into the darkness, a deer, no problem. Or jump and run at full tilt, a cat, again no problem. Or stay low to the ground and move quickly and decisively around the perimeter of the yard, a skunk! Now, that's a problem. The light reveals the problem and I know what to do.

God shown His light on Moses; in fact, God created Moses and the Exodus to show us that Love must be the life-force or light that leads us through our own wilderness into freedom. Exodus, whether or not it occurred as the Old Testament relates, gives us Moses, an epic hero, who meets "I AM" face to face and reluctantly accepts the task of leading his people out of captivity. Like Moses, we also are called by Love within our own wilderness to make choices that lead to freedom.

Coming of age in the '60's, I questioned everything and trusted no one, no one except of course the Bible for being raised Baptist, I knew every word to be fact. When I heard the word myth being associated with the Old Testament stories, I decided to do some personal research and found the book *The Bible Unearthed* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman in the church library. I discovered some interesting archaeological facts woven with details that created a story of a family that became a nation.

A search for Moses and the Israelites of the Exodus goes way back in early Egyptian history where records of immigrants coming from Canaan and settling in the eastern border region can be abundantly verified. One such group were the Hyksos, translated "shepherd kings." They were construction workers, landless laborers, some even climbed the social ladder to become officials and statesmen. Theirs was a long, gradual development but by the 16th century BCE these Hyksos were driven out and pursued to the frontiers of Syria. Sounds like something that happened to the Israelites.

Is there evidence of the forced labor projects of the Israelites? The OT mentions specifically construction of the City of Ramesses and although there is no mention of the name Israelite, Pi-Ramesses, the City of Ramesses, was built in the eastern delta in the 13th century BCE.

Does the name Israel ever appear in Egyptian context? According to this research, only once and that is in a stele describing a campaign of the son of Ramesses II, who decimated a people named Israel in Canaan.

What about a mass exodus? The Egyptian army had a series of forts all along the Mediterranean that would have prevented any group fleeing in that direction. But we know that they headed into the desert, right? Unfortunately decades of excavating have revealed no evidence of large numbers of people camping at any of the OT sites at that time. These places just were not there.

However, by the 7th century BCE, the facts support the story. Egyptian names mentioned in the Joseph narrative appear in society. Major place names of the Exodus are inhabited at this time. And remember how Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies? The Egyptians feared an invasion from the east and were wary of any travelers coming into their country from that direction. Furthermore and most importantly, King Josiah of Judah needed to bring his people together as a nation and what better way than with a story of YHWH, of Moses, an epic hero, and a flight to ultimate freedom. In fact, some scholars believe the Exodus story was created at this time for political reasons. A story based on earlier factual events that all the people would know about would help solidify and focus the people against any invader.

The text mentions Moses only in the biblical context and that as a leader and law-giver. God and Moses meet face to face; God reveals his name as "I AM" and tells Moses, *"I have a job for you!"* Filled with self-doubt and questioning, Moses tries to sidestep God's calling.

We too have our "Moses Moment" or maybe even a "Jonah Moment" when we totally run from what we are called to do.

If we see the "I AM" as Light, as Love, as the Way, we see and know what we must do, even as Moses did. With self-doubt and questioning, he heads into the wilderness just as we do. In the wilderness, we cannot take care of ourselves; we must rely on someone or something else. Moses relied on God and had faith. This is so hard for us to do; we feel we must do it ourselves.

The need to have faith reminds me of a story from Kenya.

My husband and I lived and taught in Kenya some years ago. One day Roy was out in the field with his students teaching them how to drive a tractor. Now these young men all wanted to learn and all wanted a chance to drive that tractor. Finally it was Job Matari's turn. Job was a good Christian young man and eager to please. He jumped up on the tractor and... drove it straight into the pond where it sank and, of course, got stuck.

*"Well, Job," says my husband, "what are you going to do about that?!"*

*And without hesitating, Job responds, "Well, sir, I plan to get along praying and hope the answer comes to me by morning!"*

He had faith that by morning the answer would come and he would know what to do.

And Moses as leader of his people relied on Yahweh for answers and direction and also for law.

We all know the story of Moses carrying the ten commandments down off the mountain to the people. And thereby God's word comes down to the people. The first commandment *"I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me."* In other words, Love must come first, must come before self. Love, the ultimate and first God, must be all-powerful and what we follow. And we can follow it to our own freedom.

For with love comes the gift of forgiveness, forgiveness of others and of ourselves. When we forgive others, we clear our minds; when we forgive ourselves, we unleash our awesome potential that moves us closer to God.

John says, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."* Again a first: in the beginning. And of course the Word is Jesus, is Love. And in Genesis, *"In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light."* Light: the spark of life. God is Light and Life and Love and in dwells us all. This must come first; this must be our first commandment.

Moses envisioned something on that mountain, something that filled him with the wisdom and strength to lead, to put God first, to let God do it.

We too have a vision. We may not know it but we meet it everyday, in everyone. Light, Word, Love: it leads us to our own Promised Land.